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SUBJECT: Special Media Reaction Report The Sunni Split on the Constitution

1. (U) SUMMARY. Within the Sunni community two positions have emerged on the constitution, an approach of continued engagement and a rejectionist approach. This debate is being carried out in the media with both camps reaching out to major Iraqi and pan-Arab outlets to espouse their positions. Included are several excerpts from TV and print sources highlighting the differing points of view. END SUMMARY

2. (U) With Shi'a and Kurdish general acceptance of the draft constitution, there is a new focus in the Iraqi media on the differing opinions about the constitution held by the various Sunni factions. Two distinct poles are evident: those who favor continued engagement and seek to affect changes in the current draft, with the potential of supporting the constitution in the referendum if their demands are met and those who reject the constitution as a whole, see no potential for compromise and are already focusing their efforts on defeating the constitution in the referendum. In Iraqi and pan-Arab media, two individuals have emerged as vocal spokesmen representing these two positions, Tariq Al-Hashimi, spokesman for the Iraqi Islamic Party and Saleh Al-Mutlaq, member of the Iraqi National Dialogue Council. Both have appeared on several Iraqi and pan-Arab talk shows and are being widely quoted in the print media.

3. (U) Supporting continued dialogue and engagement, Tariq Al-Hashimi has made the following statements reported in the media;

-- 29 Aug 05 Al Jazeera News Channel

"It is an incomplete draft and the party continues to have reservations over many of the issues enshrined in it. This is the opinion of the Iraqi Islamic Party. The party, through all possible political efforts, will not hesitate to amend these paragraphs until they become compatible with the country's higher interests and the concerns of Iraqis in the present and the future."

Replying to a question on whether the party is calling on Iraqis to reject the draft constitution if "gaps" are not dealt with, Al-Hashimi says:

"Not the entire draft is bad. It includes good and bad elements. We shall confront the elements which we continue to believe that it would be in the interest of the country and Iraqis to change now or in the future. The Islamic Party contests this draft constitution, but does not reject it in part and parcel."

-- 29 Aug 05 Reuters

"We have not signed the constitution and we still have the time

starting from now until the referendum comes. We might say yes to the constitution if the disputed points are resolved."

4. (U) Further outlining the Iraqi Islamic Party's position, Az-Zaman Newspaper published the following article by Ali Al-Mosawi on August 30, 2005 entitled, "Islamic Party Demands Modifications before Accepting the Draft Constitution."

--"Also, the Iraqi Islamic Party said its support for the draft constitution depends on the acceptance of modifications it demanded. Tariq Al-Hashimi added that they might support the constitution if the disputed issues are settled. The party's political office confirmed in a statement, which Az-Zaman received on Monday, that 'the draft, regarding the disputed issues related to 'federalism, regional authorities, identity, and the distribution of wealth.'"

5. (U) Highlighting moderate Sunni's interest in continued engagement in the political process, Ad-Destour Newspaper published the following story on August 30, 2005, entitled, "Allawi Will Return to Office in Exchange for Brokering a Timetable for the Withdrawal of Foreign Forces." The article contains a key Sunni constitutional demand to revoke the de-Ba'athification laws.

--"Former PM Ayad Allawi and the Shiite leadership supporting him have reached an agreement with Sunni groups, including the Islamic Scholar Association and the Iraqi Islamic Party, to support Allawi's return to office in return for his guarantee of: obtaining a timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. forces, revoking de-Ba'athification laws, and protecting those in the so-called resistance leadership. The agreement was reached during a meeting held in an Amman hotel and attended by Allawi on behalf of the Shiites; Sunnis were represented by Muthana Harith Al-Dhari, a member of the Islamic Scholars' Association, Abdul Salam Al-Kubaisi, a member of the Islamic Scholars' Association's Representatives Abroad Council, and Mohammed Abbas Al-Kubaisi, in

addition to other Sunni politicians close to Allawi including Ayhem A Samaraiee and representatives of the Iraqi Islamic Party."

16. (U) Demonstrating the rejectionist Sunni view of the constitution, Saleh Al-Mutlaq has made the following statements reported in the media;

--28 Aug 05 - Al-Sharqiya TV

"The constitution must either be accepted or rejected as a whole. If single point in the constitution is unacceptable, voters will reject the constitution altogether. Here lies our disagreement with the brothers. We told them not to mention certain points in the constitution that might lead to its rejection. We believe that the Iraqi citizen will reject this draft because of the presence of these controversial points. I think that if this constitution passes as it is, it will worsen everything in the country and it will increase the violence in the country. But at the same time we are asking through these channels all the Iraqis to express their views in a very peaceful way and be away from the violence.

Practically speaking, if the constitution has one paragraph over which there is no agreement or which will not be approved by the Iraqi people, the Iraqi citizen will be forced to reject the constitution because of this paragraph. When the citizen finds that this constitution lays the foundation for partitioning Iraq, he will not accept it. When he finds that this constitution separates him from the Arab world and obliterates his Arab identity although the Arabs constitute 82 percent of the population, he will not accept the constitution."

--28 Aug 05 Al Jazeera TV

"The scheme is clear. It seeks to divide Iraq into Sunnis, Shiites, a Kurds. If we continue to concentrate on this issue, it will be entrenched in the mind of the citizen and increase sectarian division in the country. Therefore, we receive scores of notables and chiefs of southern tribes daily. They express support for our position and they are worried like us about the fate of the country as a result of this constitution. Therefore, the issue is not confined to the Sunni Arabs it also applies to the Shiite Arabs.

What increased our fears is that in addition to the adoption of the principle of federalism, a paragraph in the constitution stating that Iraq -- land and people -- is an indivisible integral unit was omitted. There is a feeling that there are intentions to partition Iraq. There is an omission of an important paragraph from the constitution stating that this country cannot be partitioned. In accordance with this constitution, we are moving toward division. I believe that the Iraqi will reject any constitution that leads to the partitioning of Iraq."

17. (U) Although the Sunni representatives on the drafting council rejected the constitution that was submitted to the National Assembly it is clear that this position is not homogeneous throughout the Sunni community. Editorials in Iraq and throughout the region have been critical of the Sunni leadership's refusal to compromise and reach an agreement, specifically criticizing Saleh Al-Mutlaq. This position is best captured in an Aug 30 editorial by Ahmed Al-Rubei in the pan-Arab Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, widely read in Iraq, entitled "The Liberation of Sunni Arabs in Iraq:"

--"We regret that a small group in Iraq succeeded in kidnapping the Arab Sunnis groups in Iraq and to speak in their names. We feel sorry, that they now have a spokesperson [Saleh Al-Mutlaq] that speaks only for himself, but claims to represent all of the Sunnis including the educated, the activists, politicians, academics and tribal members. We are sorry that there are extremists who occupy most of the Sunni's mosques and turn Friday's speeches into a provocative call to violence. Our leaders claim that they are representing the Sunni. They are deceiving us by talking against the occupation force, but in reality they are encouraging violence against Iraqis. They talk in name of democracy and freedom but they want to take us back to the dictatorial past and they are now the echo of terrorism."

Khalilzad